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The Media Effect and the Implications for Racial Minority Groups

Abstract

The Media Effects Theory explains the impact media exposure can have on both the individual and societal level. Recent studies have shown that the increase in media consumption influences the perceptions an individual develops about their self and of other groups. The attitudes individuals develop become more susceptible to media influence when they are given smart technology starting in early childhood. The lack of diversity and negative stereotypes portrayed within the media magnifies the media effect experienced by minority users. The news, entertainment, fashion, and beauty industries are areas of the media that society has become particularly fixed on. These industries have struggled to portray the racial, ethnic and gender diversity that exists within the United States, which has an impact on the societal attitudes surrounding race and gender.

Keywords

Media Effects, Race, Social Media

Disciplines

Communication | Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication | Mass Communication | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Social Media

Comments

Written for AFS 250: Black Feminism in Film and Hip-Hop.

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The Media Effect and the Implications for Racial Minority Groups

The use of mass media has increased dramatically throughout the twenty-first century. The term “media” encompasses both news and entertainment such as television, advertisements, music, radio, magazines, social media apps, books and video games (CommGAP 2005). The increase in mass media exposure is a consequence of the digital age. The Media Effects Theory explains the impact media exposure can have on both the individual and societal level. Recent studies have shown that the increase in media consumption influences the perceptions an individual develops about their self and of other groups. The attitudes individuals develop become more susceptible to media influence when they are given smart technology starting in early childhood. The lack of diversity and negative stereotypes portrayed within the media magnifies the media effect experienced by minority users. The news, entertainment, fashion, and beauty industries are areas of the media that society has become particularly fixated on. These industries have struggled to portray the racial, ethnic and gender diversity that exists within the United States, which has an impact on the societal attitudes surrounding race and gender.

Media exposure has increased across all demographics in the United States. The Pew Research center has collected information regarding the rate of social media adoption among adults since 2005. The most recent data reveals that adults ages 18-29 have the largest number of social media users at an 88% participation rate (Perrin 2015). The 30-49 demographic indicated a 78% participation rate and the 50-64 demographic revealed a participation rate of 64% (Perrin 2015). Additionally, roughly three-quarters of Facebook users – and around six-in-ten Instagram users – visit social media sites at least once a day (Perrin 2015). These statistics indicate that the

majority of the adult population has incorporated social media usage into their daily routines. A significant portion of the 18-29 demographic indicated that social media is their preferred source for U.S news. The cultivation effect explains the impact daily media exposure can have on an individual from a psychological perspective. For example, a person that frequently views television may start to believe that the real world is similar to the television world (CommGAP 2005). Media exposure can alter an individual's attitudes and researchers have become increasingly concerned with the effect cultivation can have on the racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes individuals can potentially develop (CommGAP 2005).

The way news media outlets report crime stories in the United States is extremely problematic. Research has found that people tend to overestimate the number of ethnic minorities that participate in violent crimes, and disproportionately depict whites as victims. Nazgol Ghandnoosh (2014) published a report titled "Race and Punishment: Racial Perceptions of Crime and Support for Punitive Policies". Ghandnoosh reports that a survey study conducted in 2002 reveals that the general public estimated that 40 percent of those who committed violent crimes who were African American, when the actual rate was 29 percent (Ghandnoosh 2014). The general public overestimates black participation in crimes such as burglaries, drug sales, and juvenile crimes by roughly 20 percent (Ghandnoosh 2014). Americans have estimated that about 27 percent of violent crime is committed by Hispanics, which exceeds the proportion of Hispanic prison population by 10 percent. The racial bias developed by the general public is a direct result of news media over reporting crimes committed by people of color on white people, and under reporting black on black and white on white crimes (Ghandnoosh 2014). Only 10 percent of the violent crimes in the United States consist of whites that have been victimized by blacks, yet

these stories make up over 42 percent of the televised crime stories (Ghandnoosh 2014).

Ghandnoosh also reports that in the media, black men are more likely to be shown custody, but less likely to be named. She states that crimes become more localized when suspects are named within the media. When unnamed suspects are featured within the media, it contributes to the stereotype of the “dangerous black man” (Ghandnoosh 2014). Since the publication of Ghandnoosh’s report in 2014, racial tension throughout the country have escalated following the inauguration of President Trump. Despite the rise of racially motivated hate crimes committed by whites, the news media coverage is disproportionately focused on violent crimes committed by minority groups.

The entertainment industry also perpetuates harmful stereotypes through type casting ethnic minorities as harmful tropes. Black men and women are frequently casted as tropes in both TV and film. Black men are often portrayed as the “Angry Black Man” or “The Goofy and Clumsy Black Man”. The Angry Black Man trope is harmful to the perception of black men, because it further perpetuates the stereotype that black men are “savage” men that are frequently involved in violent crimes. “The Goofy and Clumsy” stereotype is harmful because these characters are developed to serve as a source of comic relief. These characters are generally never taken seriously by the audience which can unconsciously influence society’s perception of black men. Black women portrayed as a “Jezebel” or the non-sexual “Mammy”. The Jezebel stereotype was developed during slavery to rationalize sexual relations between white slave owners and black slaves (Pilgrim 2002). White slave owners believed that they did not have to rape black women, because they viewed them as hyper-sexual women that were not satisfied with black men (Pilgrim 2002). The Jezebel is depicted similarly in modern day media, as a

sexual woman that does not express emotion or a desire for personal relationships. The Mammy character is the contrasting trope to the Jezebel. The Mammy is typically portrayed as a non-sexual black woman that devotes her life to serving white families. The mammy trope is harmful because it depicts black women as prioritizing serving others over self-care. The exposure to these tropes in the media is damaging to the perceptions developed by black men and women, as well as the rest of society.

A study conducted by Nancy Signorielli (2009) examined the representation of black characters in primetime television shows airing between 1997-2008. She found that not only were there a limited number of black characters in the shows aired during this time period, but the black characters were limited to certain categories of television. Black characters were featured on channels with lower viewership and were generally limited to comedic roles (Signorielli 2009). A longitudinal study conducted by Nicole Martins and Kristen Harrison (2012) measured the impact of television exposure on the self-esteem of black and white elementary school children. The results of the study reveal that television exposure has a negative effect on the self-esteem of black elementary school children, but does not have an effect on white children's self-esteem. The results of this study could be attributed to the lack of diversity in television. When black children do not see characters that look like them, it is more likely they will start to believe their racial identity is less desirable. A survey study conducted by Monique L. Ward (2004) highlights the impact of that quality depictions of race and ethnicity (Mastro 2017). The results of her study reveal that black high school students indicated higher appearance self-esteem when they were able to identify with black male characters. The results

of these studies indicate that increasing racial diversity within primetime effect has the potential to decrease negative media effects experienced by racial minority groups.

Many companies have made an effort to diversify the actors in their advertisements as a way to better connect with american consumers. The millennial population, which is the largest living population in the United States, is composed of 44 percent minorities (Frey 2018). Millennials are the most racially diverse population in United States history, and population distribution of following generations is projected to become even more racially diverse. Millennials have the most spending power of any generation and are expected to have a collective spending power of 1.4 trillion dollars by 2020 (Frey 2018). Millennial's willingness to spend makes them extremely valuable consumers in the United States economy. Research has found that millennials are more inclined to make a purchase if they feel they can identify with the brand. When both men and women look at a brand's advertisements and see people that look like them, they become more inclined to engage with the brand. The Media Effects theory supports the idea that when people do not see models and actors that physically look like them, it can have negative implications on their self perception. Recent studies also reveal that millennial women invest a significant portion of their income into the fashion industry each month.

The fashion industry has struggled with accurately portraying the United States' diverse population in both advertisements and runway shows. The industry historically has faced backlash for its lack of racial and body diversity. It's elitism and lack of inclusion perpetuates unrealistic beauty standards that push the image of the tall, size zero, caucasian female (Segran 2018). Many high end designers claim that thin, models caucasian "better represent their vision of their clothes", when in reality they are vocalizing an outward bias towards women from

minority backgrounds (Segran 2018). Black women are at a significant disadvantage compared to white models within the fashion industry and are given significantly fewer opportunities to book jobs. The discrimination black models face in the fashion industry is something supermodel Naomi Campbell claims has remained somewhat stagnant since she began her career in the 1980's. Campbell claims that the industry has made minimal effort to include dark skin girls in the industry. When she first began her career, brands would not have the products necessary to style her for photoshoots and runway shows. Campbell would have to bring her own styling kits to jobs with products to style her hair and match her skin tone, in order to develop the looks required to participate in shows (Andrews 2016). Campbell explains that a black models may lose her chance at a job "if there was difficulty for the technician to actually do their hair" (Andrews 2016). When brands do not hire stylists with the skills to prepare models of all races, it makes it more difficult for black girls to pursue many opportunities. The discrimination that Campbell has faced throughout her career is still being experienced by black models currently in the industry (Andrews 2016). Campbell recently called out the industry for capitalizing on black culture. She claims black culture inspires many designer's designs, but the industry fails when it comes down selecting black women to represent brands on both the runway and in the audiences at shows (O'Malley 2017). The industry needs to work internally to provide models from all racial and ethnic backgrounds equal opportunities within the industry.

The five part documentary series, *Black Like Me*, highlights Leomie Anderson, Khoudia Diop, Nyakim Gatwech and Ajak Deng's experiences with racial discrimination in the fashion industry. These models' experiences show that the fashion industry is sending a message that blackness still does not fall within the industry's beauty standards. Leomie Anderson recalls

numerous occasions where she had been told that brands were not looking for any “African girls” after waiting hours to enter a casting. Anderson realized during her first fashion week that having dark skin limits the number of opportunities she has access to within the industry. She claims that the prejudices brands have against dark skin girls is so normalized in the fashion industry that she did not realize how it affected her self-esteem from a young age (Hickman 2018). Nyakim Gatwech recalls experiences where brands did not have the products necessary to complete hair and makeup for the black models participating in shows. She states that makeup artists will often tell her she does not need makeup because her “skin is flawless”, when they truthfully just do not have the shades to match different black skin tones. Ajak Deng became so frustrated with the discrimination that she faced within the industry, that she temporarily quit modelling. However, she explains that she made the decision to start modelling again because she received an overwhelming number of messages from black women urging Deng to return to the industry. These women expressed that they were inspired by Deng, because she was one of the few models featured in fashion campaigns they felt that they could relate to.

The Fashion Spot conducted an analysis on 192 Fashion print ads published in 2018 and reported that 34.5 percent of the 530 models cast women of color (Tai 2018). During the Fall/Winter 2019 New York Fashion week, only 10 percent of the designers were black and only 15 percent of the models that walked the runway were black. However, there is discrepancies between what the industry considers to be diverse and what the general public considers diverse. Models such as Gigi and Bella Hadid are listed under the “POC” category, which insinuates these diversity statistics may be skewed much higher than they are in reality. The industry has been criticized for “white-washing” their standards for diversity, which leaves the majority of

women in the United States unable to identify with many fashion labels. When black women are given opportunities to work with brands within the industry, they are often boxed in to certain stereotypes such as “the exotic” “tribal” or “the street style” looks (Pinnock 2017).

The fashion industry has a long way to go before it is considered inclusive, but the beauty industry is making strides to normalize inclusivity. The beauty industry has historically showcased very limited standards of beauty. The industry developed advertisements featuring thin white models, with eurocentric features. For nearly a century, these beauty standards were the only images exposed in the media which isolated the majority of women from the beauty industry. It was not until 1992 that Veronica Webb, an american supermodel and actress, became the first black woman to land a major beauty campaign (Wilson 2013). Webb signed an exclusive contract with Revlon and paved the way for other black models to break into the mass beauty market. Diverse models are now consistently featured in beauty campaigns for brands across the industry, but the real call for diversity is within the product ranges these brands are selling.

In 2017, Rihanna sparked the shift in diversity standards for cosmetic companies when she launched her company, Fenty Beauty. Fenty Beauty’s most renowned product is their liquid foundation, which is available in 40 different shades. Rihanna’s company spent two years developing quality product formulas that provide anyone the opportunity to find a shade that matches their skin tone (Shatzman 2017). Fenty Beauty’s “inclusive spirit” is not only reflected in their product assortment, but within their beauty campaigns. The company has been praised for developing campaigns that genuinely showcase diversity. The company’s advertisements are arguably the most diverse in both the fashion and beauty industries. Since the launch of Fenty Beauty, many other brands within the beauty industry have expanded the number of shades

offered within their skin product lines. Bare Minerals, Maybelline, L'Oreal, Bobbi Brown, Mac and Clinique are a few of the brands that have worked to develop an inclusive line of foundation shades. Some brands, such as Beauty Blender, have been criticized for attempting expand their product shades in order to stay competitive, rather than developing quality products that actually provide options for women in the black community.

Aside from diversifying the range of products offered within the beauty market, progress is also being made to further the conversation surrounding the beauty standards that are still present within the media. Tia Tappan founded The Diversity in Beauty Summit in 2017, as a way to continue the conversation surrounding inclusion within the beauty industry. She founded the summit as a way to progress the conversation surrounding colorism. Tappan recalls past experiences when men would tell her “she is cute for a dark skinned girl” and “they prefer girls with lighter complexions” (Allen 2018). She explains that because girls with her complexion were never showcased in the media, she felt as if she was less desirable than girls with lighter complexions. Tappan developed The Diversity in Beauty Summit to provide a platform for businesses and consumers to have a conversation about diversity within the beauty industry. The summit features CEO's, makeup artists, influencers, and other women from the industry that have been on the forefront of creating change within the industry. Tappan states that the women she provides a platform to speak consistently work to normalize inclusivity within the industry, rather than capitalizing on the “diversity trend” to increase company sales. She claims that similar to the fashion industry, the beauty industry needs to make internal changes in order to reach a point of full inclusion within the industry. Beauty companies need more diverse female

chemists developing products and executive making decisions within the industry, in order to create products that meet the needs of people from all backgrounds (Allen 2018).

Mass media has become a staple in cultures across the world. Research shows that the use of media is on an upward trend and future generations will continue to be exposed to mass media at younger ages. It is important that individuals realize the impact media exposure can have on the attitudes they develop towards themselves and others. The lack of diversity and perpetuation of stereotypes within the media, has proven to have a negative effect on the self-esteem of groups that do not feel they are being represented within the media. Industries could experience a decline in engagement if they do not meet the millennial demand for diversity and inclusion. Although many industries that society is exposed to through mass media have a long way to go before they are considered fully inclusive, the beauty industry has shown the positive impact increasing diversity can have for brands. If social media is used as a way to spark positive conversations surrounding diversity within the media, racial diversity could be normalized within the media quicker than previous change insinuates.

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